

Review of *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* by Sabrina Strings (New York University Press)

by Meshell Sturgis | Book Reviews, Issue 9.1 (Spring 2020)

ABSTRACT In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings argues that the origins of present day fat phobia stem from moral and scientific shifts of the Enlightenment period. Affected by a history of racial slavery in America and other parts of the world, the religious, medical, philosophical, and aesthetic opinions of elite white men shaped how the white woman's body became representative of nationhood through its ascriptions as morally right in its svelte figure. The black woman's body, ostensibly the complete opposite (i.e., obese and worthy of denigration), consequently became the basis for the favored white woman's essentialized attributes.

KEYWORDS biopolitics, Blackness, bodies

Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia. By Sabrina Strings. New York: New York University Press, 2019, 304 pp. (hardcover) ISBN: 9781479819805. US List: \$89.

Sabrina Strings's monograph, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, contributes a much-needed historiographic intervention towards revealing and critiquing the embodied, biopolitical implications of race, as it operates in tandem with gender and sexuality, among other things. The book unravels a generative critique of fatphobia and of present-day body ideals suffused with pro-thin and anti-fat dispositions, by tracking rhetorical deployments of race which, as a symbol, has historically functioned as a conduit for such sentiments. Strings's project traces the "key figures . . . as well as the sociocultural and political factors" that supported the tethering of racism to the body and contributed to contemporary size biases (5–6). Plaiting together accounts of those who rose to power through various institutions of influence, Strings depicts the circumstances that not only fostered hegemonic values about bodily appearance but shaped how such standards were received by the general public.

With a sustained focus on the black woman's body, Strings describes the racial scientific rhetorics that have infused various popular texts over time, from portraiture by late European Renaissance artists like Albrecht Dürer and Raphael and their neoclassical theorist counterparts to women's magazines from the Age of Reform like *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of how the upper class differentiates themselves from the lower classes and Michel Foucault's postulate that health management is biopolitical, Strings not only identifies the United States as the central locale of anti-fat bias but also illuminates the syncopations through which art, philosophy, medicine, and religion combined to produce pro-thin biases in the twentieth

century (7–8). As a sociologist who studies race, gender, and embodiment at the intersection of medicine and media, Strings uses conjunctural analysis to analyze how the black woman's body first became tethered to fatness as part of the national endeavor of instantiating whiteness and making it appear supreme.

Split into three parts, the book begins by acknowledging that “plump” women's bodies were desirable in the sixteenth century, or at the least, ambivalence prevailed in conceptions about the “othered” Africana body. However, the seventeenth century marks a shift wherein “a philosopher's slim ideal” is born, as “the fat male body became a sign of poor moral character and mental incapacity” (9). In the second part, Strings describes how, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “body size became a sign of race, morality, and national identity” in “the context of religious health reform movements and the massive immigration of Irish racial Others” (10). New eugenic discourses of inter- and intra-racial mixing emerged. Finally, the last part of the book ties together late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century medical opinions on the proper body size to the current “so-called obesity epidemic” (11).

Through meticulous biographies of highbrow influencers like George Cheyne, “an eighteenth-century medical man” (100) and Elizabeth Bisland, a nineteenth-century writer and editor of *Cosmopolitan*, Strings traces the origin of “a fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness,” attributing this lived reality to the historic “rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the Spread of Protestantism” (6). Investigating how American popular medicine has changed from fearing the “meagerness of the physiques of (elite white) women” to viewing “fatness, especially among black women, as the greater threat to public health” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Strings examines not just how fatness was deemed immoral and became associated with blackness, but also how “slenderness, especially among women, was both aesthetically preferable and a sign of national identity” (4–5). Using historical narrative and process-tracing methods, Strings paints a picture of how the black woman and her body has come to be seen in a variety of ways, from “well-proportioned and plump” (17) to “greedy, excessive” (84), and essentially “immoral and unhealthy” (125). Many prominent American figures are implicated as Strings acknowledges the participation of Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Kellogg in producing “fear of the black body,” which was “integral to the creation of the slender aesthetic among fashionable white Americans” (212).

Some might think that with all the mentioning of “fleshiness,” (Strings, 2019, 31) Hortense Spillers's “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” would be a primary source.¹ Others may wonder how such a project could convene without direct response to Stephanie M. H. Camp's call for research on “ideas about beauty and ugliness” that “remain entangled with the invention and ongoing reinvention of race itself,” noting that “whether in the service of racism or antiracism, beauty was and is a constitutive element of the meaning of race in the United States.”² However, Strings's work adds “a much-needed intersectional component to the analysis of the development of fat phobia and the slender aesthetic, revealing race to be the missing element in many of these analyses” (212). In fact, the omissions of the works of Spillers and Camp only testify to Strings's laser focus on past contours of black embodiment with regards to attitudes about body size specifically.

Personally, I found reading *Fearing the Black Body* pure pleasure while sitting alone at restaurants. One day, while reading the book and nibbling on french fries, I felt especially affirmed in my gut feeling regarding an incident just the day before when a student had

assumed I was not the yoga instructor of the class he had shown up to take. Equipped with the book's lens, I understand that my racialized body vis-à-vis gender, size, and skin color is but a vehicle in the social imaginary. The racism I experience in the yoga studio has little to do with what I actually do, the size of my yoga pants, or the particular curves of my body. Instead, it has everything to do with the insidious racism that is rooted in the landscape of imperial, colonial, anti-Black, patriarchal, and Christian history that governs our present-day relations.

While the argument of *Fearing the Black Body* reveals a thread in the tapestry of ways the body is tethered to race, it is nonetheless a relevant and entirely necessary contribution that could not have come at a better time. I look forward to reading more of Dr. Strings's work. She is a keen writer with a gift for revealing the latencies in American history using sharp critique, robust detail, incisive argumentation, and thought-provoking analysis.

Notes

1. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81. [↗](#)
2. Stephanie M. H. Camp, "Black is Beautiful: An American History," *The Journal of Southern History* 81, no. 3 (2015): 690. [↗](#)

Author Information

Meshell Sturgis

Meshell Sturgis is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington, where she critically studies representations of difference in visual culture and alternative media. She has a B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a M.A. in Cultural Studies from The University of Washington - Bothell. She is currently a Research Assistant for the Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity and a resident of the Black Embodiment Studio.

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